"LETTING GOD BE GOD"
JOB 38:1-11
MATTHEW 11:2-6

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The question is : Shall God cease to exist whenever he fails to live up to our expectations of him? It's a very old question, asked from the beginning of man's quest to know God. Asked because men have never been very good at letting God be God. Philosophically, when we think about God, we begin with ourselves - our ideas, concepts; our notions of what he should be like and we proceed to construct a God who looks, sounds and acts very much like a superlative human being. And then when something happens that calls into question our carefully fabricated theology, when our self made deity doesn't perform as we know he shoud, the whole structure collapses.

Shall God cease to exist whenever he fails to live up to our expectations? A very old question and avery contemporary question....I have chosen two portions of Scripture this morning in which it is present: John the Baptist, sitting in Herod's prison, sending messengers to Jesus to ask "Are you the one?" And centuries before that, in a magnificent and dramatic poem about a man by the name of Job.

It is set in the context of the courts of heaven. God is proud of his man Job, a man of "blameless and upright life", a man of immense wealth with a prosperous family. Satan, also present in God's court challenges Job's faithfulness. In so many words he maintains that if Job should lose everything he has he will surely sing a different tune. Thus the debate is joined, the issue set. Now, Job is poetry, not biography. And it does violence to the integrity of the writer as well as the point of the poem to deduce that God actually toys with the welfare of his children in order to win an argument.

The question is, "Can God remain in the heart of man, when he stops living up to man's expectations." And so it begins. One day Job's life comes crashing in. A series of messengers comes to Job with the news that bandits have made off with all his oxen, asses, sheep and camels, and that

every one of his servants had been slain. A comfortable, affluent man suddenly has absolutely nothing. And even as the last messenger was telling this terrible tale another appeared with word that a violent wind storm had flattened the house in which his seven sons and three daughters were eating. All were dead.

And Job said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

With that Job is afflicted again, this time with "loathsome sores" from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. And we see him finally, totally humiliated, crushed, nothing left - not even his personal dignity - sitting in a pile of ashes, scratching his sores.

Three men come to Job and then a fourth. After mourning with him for a while, they attempt to help him explain why all this has happened. But it doesn't work: nothing fits: the traditional answers are stale and flat. God, in man's expectation, blesses the righteous and punishes the wicked. His friends imply that if Job searches his heart he will discover that hidden inquity - that terrible evil - for which he has reaped his reward. But Job knows better. He has done nothing wrong: He has done nothing that might justify this total collapse of his life and everything in it that had meaning.

The Well-meaning but irrelevant friends leave and his wife turns on him. "Curse God and die" is her advice. And then, Job confronts his creator: "Why? What are the charges against me? Let me answer them. What could I have done to deserve this?" The man wants to argue with God.

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Now, one of the most significant meanings in Job is precisely at this point, although we ordinarily miss it. Job never does follow his wife's advice: he never does curse God and die: he never doubts the existence of God which we must deduce was Satan's agenda in the first place. Instead he hurls an angry prayer into the sky: "What are the charges against

me?"

The 38th chapter, soaring poetry, is the beginning of God's response to his man's brave challenge...

"Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind. 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man I will question you, and you shall declare to me...

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined it's measurements? Surely you know.."

Relentlessly, almost mockingly, the questioning continues -

"Have you commanded this morning since you days began? And caused the dawn to know its place? Have the gates of heaven been revealed to you? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare if you know all this."

And the discourses of God end, strangely with Job saying: ".... I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me which I did not know. I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see thee."

That is to say: here, at the lowest ebb, desparate, alone, ruined, chided by God himself for his arrogance in wanting only to know why it had happened, Job finds his faith. Here, in the darkest valley - the reality of God becomes a personal reality and no longer just an idea.

The story ends with Job's wife returned, his fortune restored, seven more sons and three more daughters on the way. And they lived, apparently, happily everafter.

That's the way a poem should end. And yet the problems and questions don't end. And perhaps that is how it should be too. Perhaps every man must stand ultimately where Job stood. Thomas John Carlisle observes that Job is "....an uneasy book because it questions some of our taken-for-granted: some of our pet ideas and pious hopes and simplistic explanations for a world that can't help being difficult and mysterious. " (Enquiry. September-November,1973)

One thing is certain: innocent people do suffer. The nearly universal expectation of men is that a just and righteous God would not let it happen. But it does.

In the prologue to Archibald MacLeish's pullitzer prize winning play, J.B., based on Job, God and Satan are setting the stage for the drama.

God says: "Oh, there's always someone playing Job"

Satan says: "There must be thousands
Millions and millions of mankind
Burned, Crushed, broken, multilated
Slaughtered, and for what? For thinking!
For walking around the world in the wrong
skin, the wrong-shaped noses, eyelids:
Sleeping the wrong night the wrong city -
London, Dresden, Hiroshima
There never could have been so many
Suffered more for less.")P.12)

Or, a little more immediately: I was talking with a Viet Nam veteran not long ago about the church and he observed that over there it really didn't make any difference. "The boys who were religious got it just like anybody else," he said.

A just and loving God shouldn't allow innocent people to suffer. "Why me, O Lord?" we cry with Job. "Why did it happen to me? What are the charges against me?" Only for many the question is not really a question. God ceases to exist when he doesn't live up to our expections.

Now, let's leave Job behind for a moment and move to the New Testament to John the Baptist, sitting in a dark, dank jail cell, his world in pieces around his feet. Great crowds of people had come out to the edge of the dessert just months before to hear him speak. He told them about God's righteousness and God's wrath. The Kingdom was at hand - the Messiah was about to come, and what a day it would be! The oppressors of Israel would

be punished: the Messian would set God's people free. And when he saw Jesus, John knew that he was the one.

But now; the herald, the witness - was in jail. The oppressors were still around: John's expectations had not been met and he felt let-down depressed. Not unlike Job. And so he sent messengers to Jesus to ask "Are you the one, or shall we look for another."

It's the same issue, really: an issue that you and I have probably already faced, but in any case, one day will. Because God doesn't always measure up to our expectations.

One writer frames it like this: "We sometimes envision how our life should turn out, or how God should make it turn out if he is really God. But then something completely different happens. A job that suited us to a "T" goes to someone else; the cure for a disease is denied us. In the process we had secretly set up a chance for God to prove that he was the director of our life. But he didn't take advantage of the opportunity." (Helmut Thielicke, How to Believe Again, P. 183)

I owuld guess all of us have experienced that. Just when we could feel a miracle coming on, a clear act of God on our behalf, something else happened. And we wondered - "is He there? Does he really care? Does he have anything to do with me?"

"Woe be it", Helmut Thielicke writes, "if God doesn't fit what we have expected of him - if he thus acts differently from what he ought to do. Then we immediately threaten him by saying that we don't think he exists." (P.184)

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Martin Walser, in a novef, Halftime, writes, ...my God is put together out of distinct plans that I have made with myself" So it was with Job. Who could question the benificense of God when the food is on the table, money in the bank and the future rosy? Or in the words of J.B. to his wife at Thanksgiving dinner...

"Not for a watch-tick, have I doubted

God was on my side, was good to me.
Even young and poor I knew it.
People called it luck: it wasn't
I never thought so from the first
Fine silver dollar to the last
Controlling interest in some company
I couldn't get - and got. It isn't
Luck."

So it was with John the Baptist, committed to his plans: sure that they were God's plans: sure that God would vindicate their rightness: sure that God would show his hand. But all John could see was Jesus of Nazareth and in the context of his expectations that wasn't much.

And so he confronted Jesus directly, as Job had contronted God. Carlisle writes:

"If nothing else, Job gives us courage to remonstrate with our creator, the author of the world which often inflicts suffering upon us in a remarkable variety of excrutiating ways. And our remonstrances need not be limited to polite pieties...They can be as boistrous and flagrant and monstrous as we feel the situation demands. And this because - as Job so constantly implies - there is someone to be addressed...." (Enquiry P.36)

That's the point - there is someone to be addressed: a God real enough to get angry with: A God who is there in our darkest hour.

In James Bladwin's novel "Another Country, Refus, a young black who had made a mess of his life, who had long ago lost all belief in God and man, commits suicide by jumping off a bridge in New York. One last thought flashes through his mind: "you wretch" he says to his lost God, "you.... almighty wretch, am I not your child too? Now I'm coming to you."

Wrapped in a curse, with a clenced fist, he reached out of his despair and said "you" to God. There is someone there to be addressed. And when we think about it, it's not at all unlike Jesus himself, hanging on the

cross. His plans in shambles - his life ebbing away, crying out, "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?"

God has set us in the world in which accidents happen. He has made us to be free in the world - which means that we are vulnerable to sickness, suffering, disappointment and death. He never promised that his people would have it any easier than other people. What he did promise was that he would be there: that in the midst of whatever happens to us, he will be our God, our father, to whom we can turn.

John asked Jesus, "Are you the one". And Jesus said, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive then sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear..." Here in your life I am doing something new.

God may not live up to our expectations. But the promise of Scripture - the promise of faith is that he is in life with us, available to us, close to us in good times and in bad. It is a promise that needs to be discovered presonally. It cannot be discussed academically. Job, sitting on the ash heap - John wallowing in prison, didn't ask philosophic questions - they threw themselves into the darkness and found that there was someone there. It was enough - and is enough. AMEN

Our father, give us the courage to trust when life tumbles in. Give us the faith to know that you are with us - that you are: through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN